



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

**Opening Statement by Jeffrey R. Krilla,  
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State  
for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor  
at  
Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting  
Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe  
Vienna, March 29, 2007**

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Colleagues:

I am Jeffrey Krilla, United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. This Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting provides a welcome opportunity to exchange views with other governments, parliamentarians, and NGOs regarding the fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association—freedoms at the core of OSCE's work in the Human Dimension.

Let me begin by expressing my government's strong commitment to protect and promote these essential freedoms.

All participating OSCE States have pledged to uphold these basic rights. They are crucial to the functioning of all democracies. As Secretary Rice recently noted, the strength of a democracy lies not in its infallibility, but in its accountability. The freedoms of expression, assembly and association are crucial to keeping government honest and responsive to the people. Indeed, the freedoms of expression, assembly and association are the oxygen of a civil society and a free press. Without them, democracy is deprived of its life's breath.

When governments prevent or impede the effective exercise of these fundamental freedoms, they call into question their commitment not just to upholding these rights, but to democracy itself.

A few weeks ago, Secretary of State Rice, Under Secretary for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, and Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Barry Lowenkron issued the Department of State's annual report on human rights practices worldwide. Assistant Secretary Lowenkron, in presenting the report, described 2006 as the "Year of the Push-back" and noted that, as the worldwide demand for greater personal and political freedom grows stronger, it is being met with increasing resistance from those who feel threatened by political and societal change.

Often this push-back is manifested by restrictions on the fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association. We have seen this regrettable phenomenon even in a number of OSCE participating States.

A key indicator of the degree of freedom of expression in a given country is the treatment accorded to independent journalists. In Turkmenistan, for example, independent journalists are often prohibited by the government from attending OSCE-sponsored events, or are harassed after they have had contact with the OSCE. Journalists also have been detained and prevented from filing reports by having their telephones disconnected. The government of Kazakhstan passed restrictive amendments to its media laws despite the OSCE Media Freedom Representative's public statement opposing them and continues to use criminal libel sanctions to silence opposition voices.

More disturbingly, in some OSCE countries, we have seen independent journalists harassed, physically assaulted, imprisoned, and, indeed, even killed. Let me take this occasion to recognize here the contributions of courageous journalists such as Russia's Anna Politkovskaya and Paul Klebnikov and Azerbaijan's Elmar Huseynov. Their fearless voices have been silenced, but their untimely deaths speak volumes about the challenges to freedom of expression and the rule of law in their countries. The deaths of these valiant journalists need to be investigated and the guilty brought to justice.

As information technology opens the world to new frontiers for freedom of expression, some governments are placing restrictions on the free flow of information and ideas to their people through the Internet. In light of these restrictions on freedom of expression, last year Secretary Rice established the Global Internet Freedom Taskforce, or GIFT. Through GIFT, my government is working with industry, human rights groups, Congress and foreign governments to maximize Internet freedom, minimize the success of repressive governments in censoring information and promote access to information and ideas over the Internet.

Freedom of expression is inextricably linked to freedom of assembly. When gauging the trajectory of a country with regard to human rights and democracy, Secretary Rice often refers to the "town square test". Can citizens walk into the middle of a town square in a given country and express their views about the government and its policies without fear of arrest, imprisonment or physical harm. Today, not all OSCE states can pass this test.

In Belarus just this past Sunday, thousands of marchers were prevented from peacefully rallying in a public square in Minsk to commemorate Freedom Day. Approximately 1,000 police, some in riot gear, sealed off public areas, searched pedestrians, arrested 45 demonstrators, and at least 30 were preemptively detained.

Also last weekend, authorities in the Russian city of Nizhniy Novgorod cracked down on the "March of Dissenters" rally. Harassment of march organizers and some cases of preventive detention preceded the event. More than a hundred political opposition activists were detained and some reportedly were beaten. This was the third incident in four months – there were similar events in St. Petersburg and Moscow—of heavy-handedness and overreaction by the authorities to a peaceful gathering of Russian citizens. Such official intolerance of peaceful assembly is particularly serious in light of upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

OSCE can be proud of its pioneering work regarding the role and rights of NGOs.

Yet, in a number of participating States, increasing constraints are being placed on NGOs. We have seen the adoption and implementation of restrictive laws and burdensome regulations regarding NGOs, as well as extralegal attempts to intimidate NGOs or even shut them down altogether. Despite these pressures, I am encouraged to note that many brave NGO representatives from a number of the participating States in question are here at this meeting.

Russia's new restrictive NGO law imposes onerous oversight and reporting measures. The Government of Uzbekistan seeks to control most NGO activity and since Andijon in May 2005 has closed down over 200 civil society organizations, including international NGOs operating in the country, citing alleged violations of law. And despite the Government of Kazakhstan's written pledge last September to allow NGOs to operate freely, the programs of international NGOs involved in non-partisan political party training have been under suspension since May.

Last December on International Human Rights Day, Secretary Rice issued on behalf of the United States 10 guiding NGO Principles regarding the treatment of nongovernmental organizations by governments. I have brought copies of the principles with me today.

These core principles were drawn from other lengthier international documents, including the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Union documents and the Copenhagen and Moscow Documents of the OSCE. My government will use the principles to guide our own treatment of NGOs. The first guiding principle, from which all others flow, is that: "Individuals should be permitted to form, join, and participate in NGOs of their choosing in the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association."

At a time when NGOs are under increasing pressure in many countries, it is imperative that democratic governments work in concert to defend the vital role that NGOs play in building free societies. We hope these principles will help to rally support in the OSCE region and across the world for embattled NGOs.

As Secretary Rice puts it: "When NGOs are under siege, democracy is undermined."

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Colleagues, for the opportunity to address this body. I also wish to thank the Government of Austria and the OSCE for being such welcoming hosts.

Thank you.